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CONSUMING BREXIT: ALIMENTARY DISCOURSES AND THE RACIAL POLITICS OF BREXIT

Muzna Rahman

Abstract

This article argues that Brexit has been reported and represented within the media and elsewhere through the language and imagery of food and consumption. Whether this is articulated via real anxieties about the effects that pulling out of the European single market will have on British foodways, or through the specific lexicon deployed when imagining the metaphors of Brexit, gastronomical readings of the various 'texts' of and around Brexit can provide productive ways of both understanding and contextualising the politics of the present moment. Specific national alimentary discourses surround and permeate the cultural and political context of Brexit, particularly with regard to race. This essay examines the intersections of national identity, whiteness and British food cultures in order to examine and interrogate some key images associated with Brexit, and considers the ways that colonial and neo-colonial narratives – in particular discourses around consumption and the alimentary self/body – are reanimated and re-deployed in representations of it.

Keywords: food, Brexit, colonialism, neo-colonialism, nostalgia, nationalism

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Biographical note

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CONSUMING BREXIT: ALIMENTARY DISCOURSES AND THE RACIAL POLITICS OF BREXIT

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Brexit has been approached in a multitude of ways. Globalisation, economic and political sovereignty, national identity, populism, immigration and asylum, nostalgia, working-class revolt, neo-imperial fantasies – there are a number of lenses through which Brexit might be viewed productively. However, as the event is incomplete, the best means of understanding it remains, at this point, obscured. In the midst of all these intersecting approaches and theorisations, a strong theme that has emerged in the nascent academic treatments of Brexit is that of imperial nostalgia. The socio-political directionality of Brexit is set against a matrix of affect that produces and is produced by a nostalgic national imaginary. This national imaginary is constituted of romantic mythologies about Britain's past, the British empire and Britain's participation in the Second World War. This nostalgia has been reported in the media and in scholarly work as a pernicious force that fuels 'belligerent national autarchism as a psychological defiance to socioeconomic disparities' (Shaw, 2018, p.23), especially in those known as the 'left behind' contingent who, it is proposed, used the referendum as a platform to express their general social and political disaffection.¹ Robert Eaglestone rebrands Lauren Berlant's 'cruel optimism' in order to account for this nostalgic mechanism, calling it 'cruel nostalgia' (Eaglestone, 2018, p.20), while Anshuman A. Mondal calls it 'imperial nostalgia' (Mondal, 2018, p.115). These critical descriptions differ in their specific focus and context but point to vital common ground. Brexit Britain's national identity and politics are mediated via the mythologies of a very specific past, one with a very specific flavour. This article is interested in these debates and framings of Brexit, but also concerned with a more commonplace topic that, pervasive as it is, has remained overlooked so far in the burgeoning academic discourse surrounding Brexit: food. This work offers a reading of the alimentary: a semiotics of hunger, consumption and food that pervades popular and media texts about Brexit Britain.

The aesthetics of Brexit often have a distinctive alimentary expression, reflective of a particular 'structure of feeling' that emerges at the juncture of present political circumstances and a redeployment of an oft called-upon British nostalgic imaginary. This imaginary combines revisions and redeployments of collective memories of Britain's past, focusing upon but not limited to its imperial past, and its heroic role as defender of sovereignty against fascist European power, as per popular discourses of the Second World War. By reading the

¹ However, as many critics have pointed out, the notion that strictly poor white working-class voters tipped the scales to Leave is a fallacy. As Anshuman A. Mondal points out in 'Scratching the post-imperial itch': 'Rather, the Leave appeal was entirely emotive and based on striking several chords that resonated with people from working-class and middle-class backgrounds who have not quite gotten used to Britain's post-imperial decline from top-dog to also-ran' (2018, p.114).

somatic dimensions of our present moment (and this refers to both the national and extra-national bodies that are the actors involved in Brexit, and also the larger body politic that is stretched this way or that: remain or leave) we can consider our current events with greater care than a received popular national discourse that struggles with undigested nostalgias, that continually clog up the national arteries, threatening at any moment to co-opt the now into a forever-and-always-better 'back then'.

In his chapter 'Scratching the post-imperial itch' in the timely *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* published in 2018, Mondal states that:

This imperially nostalgic nationalism is the only thing that working class-leavers in the post-industrial wastelands of the 21st-century Britain and the well-to-do leavers in the leafy Tory shires have in common, and it is rooted in what Raymond Williams calls the 'structure of feeling' produced by ideology, in this case the structure of feeling produced by imperial ideologies and imaginaries that have still not fully wound their way through the digestive tracts of the United Kingdom's body politic

(2018, p.114)

This imagery makes clear the suitability of alimentary metaphors when thinking through Brexit and its various nostalgic modalities. Something that is undigested in the body remains unabsorbed; it cannot be expelled, nor can it be assimilated. 'The "undigested" elements of trauma may remain in our psyche like "foreign bodies" blocking our normal functioning directly or by taking up psychic space [...] locked away in a corner of our mind' (Barnett, 2002). It can wreak havoc in the system. However, according to this metaphor something undigested is, above all, a distortion of time. It is an interruption in the correct functioning and processing of a historical temporal order, the result of which can be read as signifying a sort of repressed national trauma – pushing the past into the present, endlessly repeating and mutating into adaptive forms that may be co-opted by present needs. By coupling Williams's concept of the 'structures of feeling' with this alimentary logic, this article tries to think through some of the material expressions of Williams's idea. It is also useful for a consideration of how and why the affective economy of Brexit is articulated through alimentary discourses.

In 'Formations of feelings, constellations of things', Ben Highmore (2016) makes clear the connection between 'structures of feeling' and material cultural structures, paying attention to material objects that exist in historical processes of social production and reflection. Highmore explicates that attitudes and social patterns that affective structures contain and are constitutive of have material analogues, and these in turn translate into synesthetic social feelings.

By reminding ourselves that 'feeling' is related to a world of touch, [...] I hope to push social and cultural history towards an attention to changes in the hum-drum material world of carpets and curries, beanbags and bean sprouts. My intuition and

my gamble is that the felt world is often experienced in something like a synaesthetic mode where feelings of social flourishing and struggling take on particular flavours, sounds, colour-schemes and smells; where hope and nostalgia, melancholy and exuberance have sensual forms that are sometimes durable and sometimes fleeting. (2016, p.145)

In light of this, it becomes possible to read the historically located materiality of our current context, and to bring emergent patterns of cultural discourse – as articulated via alimentary imagery – into focus. This essay attempts a specific look at food and the somatic in order to tease out the affective structures of Brexit, and considers their origins and historical trajectory. Food has become a hot-button topic in current discussions about Brexit. Anxieties about food price, quality and availability are expressed regularly in the media, and the issue represents the largest impact that may be felt by the greatest number of people, as food lies at the very mundane heart of everyday life, or ‘lifestyle’, as Highmore describes above. Food contains a potent symbolic power, especially when matters of identity are considered – particularly national identity. Food is a demarcating line that distinguishes a particular culture from another; food is about belonging, identity and it is crucially, about survival. ‘Food identifies who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be’ (Belasco, 2008, p.1). It is not surprising that what is clearly a crisis in national identification and belonging is playing out in the arena of food. What may happen to the foodscape of Britain post-Brexit (which is already precarious for a great many people) is anyone’s guess, but tentative predictions involve skyrocketing prices, a lowering of nutritional standards and an unavailability of certain vital imported goods. Although these very real concerns are literal and pressing, the ways in which Brexit has been discussed on the level of metaphor tells us more about just these contemporary concerns. The alimentary language of Brexit represents a historical lineage that obeys the logic of an imperial and post-imperial romanticism, and it may be possible to trace a brief history of this legacy if we look into the discursive language of Brexit itself.

In November 2018, the BBC created a series of light-hearted shorts for the *Victoria Derbyshire Programme* designed to explore Brexit. These took the form of a blind date, participants were minor celebrities from the UK and beyond, and each participant was located on opposite banks of the political spectrum. They were encouraged to engage in honest, informal discourse about Brexit that a viewing public could relate to, without descending into the litigious exchanges that the issue so often produced. One particular episode paired Swedish-turned-British-television-personality Ulrika Jonsson and American screenwriter Dustin Lance Black, also a resident in the UK. These shorts mimic existing reality television formats – recreating the premise of Channel 4’s popular ‘First Dates.’ Beyond the popularity of the format, however, the commensality signified by the shared dinner table can be read as a sobering reminder that whatever the results of the referendum,

the changes that Brexit would usher into the national context would be shared amongst those in the UK, irrespective of which side of the table or political spectrum one sits. Meanwhile, the parameters of a meal-for-two provided a productive metaphor for the increasingly bipartisan politics that defined Brexit. However, even beyond this, the show alerts us to the fact that the politics of Brexit are mediated through the alimentary signifiers of its (often dyspeptic) aesthetic.

The televised blind date between Jonsson and Black makes it possible to examine the material dimensions of Brexit and consider how national feelings and structures of affect are communicated through popular, and historically specific, alimentary discourses. During the date, Jonsson represents the 'Leave' camp (intentionally represented by a Swedish national in order to avoid reinforcing any pre-conceived tropes of what a Leave voter might look like in terms of UK demographics) and Black represents the 'Remainer' (undoubtedly a cosmopolitan elite, but like Jonsson an atypical Remainer – American and somewhat removed from the British political sphere). Neither of these celebrity figures could actually vote in the referendum, and this further neutralizes any potential overzealous political rivalry that the date might produce. The setting is a typical British 'caf' – the stage is generic and suitably placeless – so in effect the date occurs in a clearly recognizable British food culture, one that is meant to appear as a democratic platform where 'common people' might congregate to discuss political matters. The date is affable, and the mood is light. Pleasantries are exchanged and talk soon turns to the subject at hand. Jonsson states that she would have voted leave, if she could have voted, while Black states 'cards on the table' that he would have voted 'Remain.' Jonsson states: 'I feel that the EU has become a massive, bloated machine that is taking big chunks out of, I don't know, sovereignty and law ...' (*Brexit Blind Dates: Ulrika Jonsson and Dustin Lance Black*, 2018, 2:11). It is the language used by Jonsson that is of interest here, not the more obvious contradiction of a Swedish national advocating so strongly for Brexit. The sense of Europe that is conveyed here is an uncomfortable one. It is fat, overextended, ravenous and stretching beyond normal limits. Putting aside for one moment the obvious fascistic associations made about Europe by Jonsson, this ravenous imagery is important for the purposes of this paper for two reasons. Firstly, it makes firm the link between an alimentary body politic and the politics and poetics of Brexit. The alimentary language deployed around the issue of Brexit has existed since the phrase was first coined, and recent fears about British food security has only amplified this. Secondly, Jonsson alerts audiences to a word that has appeared again and again in popular Brexit discourse – and that word is bloat. The word is both a somatic and an object image, its connotations are felt and seen, sometimes even smelt and tasted. All of these connotations are interesting not just because of their vivid sensory associations – they convey, in effect, how Brexit *feels* to a great many people – but also because contained within them is a number of temporal, spatial, historical and national intersections that can convey a lot about the politics

of Brexit. I want to trace a brief – albeit rather imprecise – genealogy of these intersections, through a reading of a number of different media, mostly popular and online.

The Daily Express is a conservative media platform that regularly voices the opinion of the right and has traditionally been staunchly pro-Leave. The headlines that they tend to emphasize are sensationalist and espouse similar feelings as Jonsson expresses above. A headline from November 2017 reads: ‘Brexit Victory? EU finally admit bloated budget WILL collapse without huge UK contribution’ (Falvey) while a May 2018 headline decries: ‘EU at a CROSSROADS! Juncker makes desperate attempt to DEFEND bloated EU budget’ (Bosotti, 2018). Both of these headlines exemplify a somatic sense of Europe. The headlines use the word bloat again, and it is being deployed to emphasize a sense of greed and overabundance – namely because of what is being portrayed as the unfair contribution of British money. Again, the sense here is one of too-much-ness, of taking more than one’s share, and the result is a sort of unwieldy, grossly oversized Europe. An article from a month earlier, again, gives a sensory taste of Brexit: ‘Brexit escape! EU reveal citizens WILL be forced to maintain BLOATED agricultural budget’ (Pyne, 2018). Again, the implication here is that Europe is taking, unfairly, more than it should from the British economy. This evokes the language and imagery of the colonial state, except in this contemporary reversal, Europe is the colonial power and Britain the exploited colony.

The Sun follows suit with a very similar language. The headline to a February 2019 article reads: ‘Low-grade Labour nobodies bloated with self-importance still say they know better than 17m Brexit voters’ (*The Sun*, 2019). *The Sun* is similar to *The Express* in its political position, but here the bloated imagery is being associated with Labour politicians instead of the EU. This is useful in observations of the ways in which this kind of alimentary imagery can be deployed in different ways and in different contexts, whilst still maintaining (and somewhat reconfiguring) the same social connotations. Here, bloated in the sense of being superior is being used to describe a politically alienated, liberal government whose elitist attitudes run counter to democracy itself. The headline’s anti-elitist sentiment echoes a common explanation offered by the media and academic discourses: left-voting urban elites who are out of touch with the common person and their desires were blind-sighted by a retributive voter base who had one purpose alone – to make their vote felt.

However, this somatic language can also be deployed in completely contrary directions. The liberal platform *The Guardian* demonstrates how anxieties about bloating, burping and even bursting manifest across the political spectrum. Ann Perkins writes: ‘Westminster is so bloated on Brexit, it can’t even manage its bread and butter’ (2018). The smaller headline reads: ‘Debates aren’t happening. Potential new laws are stuck in the pipe. All because of a monstrous bit of legislation’ (2018). Dyspeptic connotations abound here, pipes are described as clogged once more and the body in question here is the British political process itself. Accusations of pomposity are not limited to the ‘elite middle class,’ as the discomfort of dysfunctional bodily processes spills onto the political stage. ‘Bread and butter’

suggests that the political solutions to Brexit are manageable, but this metaphor intentionally contrasts with the complications described within the article itself. This headline demonstrates that this specific sense of the somatic – the bloated body – pervades the national politics of the moment and is multidirectional in its reach. The sense of a large, greedy, inefficient and overextended organic body pervades the national consciousness and grafts onto different entities and issues. It often refers to an unwieldy EU which, and in this iteration of the metaphor, the EU is described as an administratively gargantuan imperial power, from which Britain must break free. This idea is certainly reiterated by a strand of alarmist politics that overtly recasts Britain as victim in a colonial drama, as expressed here by David Blake, writing for pro-Brexit website *Briefings for Brexit*. ‘The EU is incapable of agreeing solutions – and instead has plans to create a European Empire. The withdrawal agreement makes us a colony of an empire that will soon disintegrate’, writes Blake (2019). In this image, the EU is coloniser, and Britain is cast as the plucky colony seeking independence, reversing the decolonising narratives of Britain’s ex-colonies. This image evokes Britain’s imperial past but reconfigures it to suit present needs. Critical readings that interrogate this particular rendering of the present suggest that its purpose is to reorient repressed national fears around falling prey to the same imperial domination that Britain historically perpetuated.

If fears of bloating and indigestion dominate commentary on Brexit, then the proffered solution is a much-needed diet. In this context, a diet implies a controlled reduction of the source of bloat until a lean body politic is achieved – whether the cuts have to be made to bureaucracy, the EU or Britain’s migrant populations. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas looks at the body as a system that reproduces the social body. The body is a microcosm for the body politic. ‘The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious’ ([1966] 2003, p.116). Douglas argues that anxieties about maintaining distinct bodily boundaries (for example, social and cultural rituals involving bodily fluids like excreta and saliva) is most evident in societies whose external boundaries are being threatened. These theorisations that link the body to the social may explain the proliferation of the alimentary rhetoric that underpins discussions of Brexit, and why abject images of digestion are produced again and again in this contemporary moment. The control of borders represents a means of combating the bloat of extraneous bodies, and the associations of those bodies and the excesses they represent. ‘The ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, “bolted down,” firm (in other words, body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control)’, writes Susan Bordo (1990, p.90) in her ‘Reading the slender body’. Although Bordo here is looking at the politics of dieting as is inflected by social constructions of gender, the associations between rationality, control and the ideal bodily shape within a neoliberal logic is made clear in her work, and this can also apply to Brexit. The excess bodies that Brexit seeks to neutralise are not female bodies, but

they are *feminised* bodies, insofar as they are cast in the role of irrationality as is associated with the somatic. The popular imaginary of Brexit's conceives the threatening migrant figure as male in most instances, but they are gendered as feminine in so far as the brown or black figure is a creature of the uncontrollable urges and desires of the body. Their received narrative is one of desire – of what has been depleted or failed to materialise in their homeland (resources, civilisation and modernity), and also emotionality (usually anger) at what they perceive as the failure of the West to provide aid out of situations of their own making. Experts and critics often cry for and bemoan the lack of 'rational debate' in political discussions around Brexit. An axiomatic rational thought being propounded as the solution to the illogic of Brexit (which is to suggest that politics before Brexit was not animated by emotion, a somewhat dubious assertion) suggests that the excess bodies – who in this instance are migrant and often non-white bodies – contain dangerous and uncontrollable irrationalities. As rational thought is the antidote to emotional and somatic excess, it is no surprise that Brexit has been described as a failure in rational government and society (Bond, 2016).

The racialised excess and otherness described here presents a threat because it counters the apparent rationality of the state, and prefigures a dangerous and chaotic apocalypse for an authentic 'British way of life'. The excess of the racial other is feminised, overly emotional, savage and chaotic – the antithesis of rationality. The excesses of the body are in turn associated with an orientalist subaltern figure, and the logic of Brexit seeks to expel these superfluous bodies – superfluous in their numbers and in the excesses of their somatic selves. This body is simply 'too much', retaining the orientalist connotations of the colonial native. The excesses of the exotic colonial/postcolonial body, or orientalist other, is expressed by the excesses ascribed to the homogeneous thousands of refugees and migrants attempting to enter Britain. Likened to insects, they represent an excess of hunger as well as matter, simultaneously taking up space with their bodies of excess and consuming resources around them, becoming bigger and bigger, and threatening in large numbers. This of course links to the insect-like language often deployed around about immigration into Britain. Former Prime Minister David Cameron used this incendiary language when speaking on the camps in Calais: 'you have got a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain because Britain has got jobs, it's got a growing economy, it's an incredible place to live' (Elgot, 2016). Combining racism and self-promotion, Cameron subtly associates the migrants with an atypical greed, whilst firmly reasserting British sovereignty and shoring up its borders, deepening the divisions between us and them.

This configuration of excess, how it is ascribed, and to whom, is no new phenomenon. At the height of Britain's empire, the colonies and their 'excesses' had long been established as a commodity that might be sampled abroad, but only introduced in a

controlled manner into national borders. They signified an overwhelming, almost sublime excess.

Early European writings on India exhibit an ethnographic obsession with customs and traditions that seem taboo, evil, and demonic to the Englishman. India is constructed as a space of bodily, political, and cultural transgression, even though it was obviously rich, fertile, and beautiful. [...] Excess and transgression, therefore, become central themes in the discourse of discovery.

(Nayar, 2012, p.103)

The colonial encounter produced an orientalist colonial subject. These fantasies of excess are transferred to the body of the nativised colonial and then latterly the postcolonial subject, and these bodies became subject to scrutiny and control once on British soil. These anxieties around the excesses of racial others have been expressed in Britain at a number of different historical points, notably around the influx of Afro-Caribbean and South-Asian immigrants from Britain's colonies after the Second World War. The control of these bodies in and across space (the discrimination these individuals experienced when attempting to find rented accommodation in post-war Britain upon arrival is an example of this) served as a means of limiting their uncontrollable, racialized otherness. Here too, the abjection of the racialized other was expressed by a distaste of their somatic subjectivity, and this is rooted in a colonial discourse that found firm footing in the postcolonial period. Again, this is expressed through food and eating.

In such understandings two stereotypes converged: that of the arrogant, privileged colonial, and that of the unhygienic South Asian peoples and food. The latter perception derived from long-standing notions of the bodily dangers facing Europeans who resided in the 'tropics,' the digestive problems spicy food was thought to cause, and unclean 'natives' who, nonetheless, might prove pleurably servile and offer a visually appealing spectacle when dressed in 'Oriental' fashion.

(Buettner, 2008, p.874, citation omitted)

Although the context is different, this colonial example represents an antecedent of the brown immigrant as a distasteful and unhygienic source of indigestion that Vote Leave seeks to eject from the nation's borders.² The excesses of the colonies become associated with the colonial body, and although the historical context differs, the native body constructed by the colonial encounter remains a stable trope that the aesthetics of Brexit draw upon. It is clear why food that has become, in large part, a theatre for Brexit anxieties.

² Although Vote Leave claimed it would police the movement of European (and so mostly white) bodies across UK borders, there was a general conflation of EU migrants with other migratory groups not covered by EU issues at all. This was accomplished by stoking fears about individuals that might enter the UK through European countries with more porous immigration policies than the UK – these unwelcome bodies were coded as uncivilised and imagined as brown and black bodies.

Nostalgic responses to Brexit are configured by appropriating the language of key moments in Britain's history – including reinvigorating imperialist fantasies and imagining a 'pre-immigration' Britain. Another of these commonly deployed narratives is the plucky British nationalism of the Second World War. As mentioned above, the antidote to anxieties of racial and postcolonial excess that can be found in the British national consciousness is, put simply, a diet. Examples of this diet can be found in the fetishisation of a specific food culture that valorises lack and simplicity. It too has its roots in a well-worn and oft drawn-upon historical nostalgia – the affective romanticism of rationing during the Second World War, and the sense of national collective pride that this history produces. Rationing presented a paradoxical social context at the time – it was a deprivation that in many ways served to produce a patriotic national identity, and provides one of the most enduring memories of those elements of the Second World War that were fought on the home front. The efforts to ration effectively were organised at a national level by the British government. One now-famous 1941 initiative involved a government campaign to encourage citizens to grow their own food – the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. The programme was largely successful (an iconic memory of the time is the image of onions being grown on Buckingham palace's grounds), and people had a simple diet for practical and patriotic reasons. Seeped in nationalistic discourse and combined with the intense feeling of national pride produced during the war, this mode of consumption became rooted in a fantasy of sovereignty. Britons not only grew their own food, but they also produced a very 'British' cuisine with the produce. This romanticised figure of the survivalist is reproduced in the aesthetics of Brexit.

In a *Mail Online* article, journalist Richard Littlejohn advocates for the revival of the spirit of resilience of the Second World War. 'Let's revive the bulldog spirit of World War II, defy the Brexit Jeremiahs and dig for victory as we prepare to leave the EU!' (2019). The first line to the article reads 'We've been here before. When Britain stood alone in World War II, the threat of hunger and starvation was a genuine possibility'. He goes on to explain in detail the 'Dig for Victory' campaign during the war, when the Ministry of Agriculture encouraged populations to grow their own produce due to food shortages caused by the war, and that the 'population responded magnificently.' However, Littlejohn is sure to let us know what he thinks of widespread panic about Brexit, particularly from the Remain camp. 'During World War II, car factories switched to making fighter planes. Post-Brexit they could be converted to manufacture mayonnaise.' The article sees anxieties about Brexit and food as nonsensical and mockingly describes it as a middle-class hysteria. Littlejohn associates these bourgeois preoccupations with a Europhilia that at best silly, but at worst un-patriotic. 'To meet modern tastes, instead of planting potatoes and growing onions, public parks could be given over to the production of tricolour quinoa and couscous' (Littlejohn, 2019). The fight against fascism found in Britain's modern memory is reimagined here, but folded into the contemporary moment, and coupled with the appropriation of an anti-colonial rhetoric (where Britain is the colony and EU the imperialist aggressor), the resulting discourse is used to

articulate fantasies of violence and survivalism. The fantasy of self-sufficiency is a key narrative of pro-Brexit discourses, and here again we see how the ideal of a lean, hardy British independent body is heralded as the solution to European fascist overtures. This is the very opposite of the bloated body and borders. The solution presented here is one of meagre resources but is controlled and efficient. It is Britain on a much-needed diet, and a return to former glory. It is not an overfed Britain, but one that has made much needed room within borders – free of unnecessary people and of unnecessary goods and services.

Survivalist practices have proliferated in the days since the referendum results. Termed ‘Brexit Preppers’, these UK residents are stockpiling foods likely to be affected by, in particular, a no-deal outcome. These individual’s paranoias and practices are both mocked and heeded in equal measure, in the media and elsewhere. The tone of the reporting is often apocalyptic. *The Sun*, a right-wing publication that echoes the mocking tone of Littlejohn above, sees the panic as unnecessary hysteria. ‘In one Facebook group, the Rambo wannabes have discussed what they would do if looters wielding axes and shovels came for them. One of them suggested using specially-trained Akita dog, a large breed with huge jaws that can be deadly to guard their homes and attack intruders on demand’ (Wynarczyk, 2019). In contrast, *The Guardian* offers a practical how-to guide in response to food anxiety. ‘Then you need bulk and protein: canned and dried pulses (kidney beans, butter beans, black beans, chickpeas) and tinned fish (sardines and tuna). Add to that tinned olives, pickled capers and jarred peppers, and you’ve basically got a cheat’s Ottolenghi’ (Sawa, 2018). Although the two publications represent opposite sides of the political spectrum (and express contrasting views on the referendum), it is interesting to note that *The Guardian*, too, taps into a sort of survivalist fantasy of self-governance and independence. In an article titled ‘Why Brexit has driven thousands back to their allotments’, Lia Leendertz writes: ‘In times of crises, Britons have always turned to self-sufficiency, and this period of political turmoil is no exception’ (Leendertz, 2019). Despite occupying a very different political position than *The Mail Online*, and treating food security issues with much more seriousness, *The Guardian* – like *The Mail* – taps into a nationalistic history rooted in crisis and war, demonstrating the power of this national mythology, and its ability to structure the affective patterns in the British population with regard to national selfhood and recognition.

Following in the same vein of self-sufficiency, in January 2018, pro-Brexit campaigners delivered a hamper of British-produced food to Brussels. More a political stunt than a genuine attempt at persuasion, campaigners claimed the basket was meant to help Michael Barnier, the chief EU negotiator, ‘fully grasp the powerful position Britain occupies globally’ (Merrick, 2018). The basket contained: Cheddar cheese, Marmite, PG Tips Tea, English wine, a jar of orange marmalade, a bottle of Hendrick’s gin, Fortnum and Mason Piccalilli, a biography of Winston Churchill and the complete works of Shakespeare. The internet was quick to point out, however, that many of the products were not the best choice for the Brexiteer’s purpose. The Anglo-Dutch company Unilever owns Marmite and PG Tips,

and has been a vocal critic of Brexit. Hendrick's Gin producer has moved its base to Ireland, and Fortnum and Mason has also been critical of Brexit, claiming that it has damaged Britain's brand. Other products inside the basket are also similarly problematic, hindering instead of helping the pro-Brexit cause. The basket's contents barely conceal a sort of globalized corporate logic but are deployed in a way that seemingly maintains Britain's distinct national boundaries. This speaks to the power of national identity – rather than national borders, and how it can be manipulated in a neo-liberal construction of authenticity. National identity is utilized by multinational corporations in order to structure a matrix of desirability that is bound up with romanticized notions of local produce, and it does so by dealing with a rather antiquated system of classification that belongs largely now to a past order, but whose romantic deployment still commands some power over national consumer bases.

The aesthetics of the basket can tell us as much about the national discourses of Brexit as the contents can. The picnic basket (as well as the traditional picnic foods inside the basket) conjure a particular vision of British nationalism that associates itself with the English countryside, an imaginative space that is characterized by an ethnic purity and an elite, legitimized possession of the land. The aesthetics and cultural codes around picnicking itself can provide telling clues about the historic version of nationalism that is being summoned by the basket. Picnicking really came into its own during the Victorian era and appears in the literature of that period. Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollop and Jane Austen found ways of introducing this form of social event into their writing (Davidson, 2014, p.621). The usually bucolic setting for a picnic provided both an ideal way of furthering character development in a relaxed environment, and a means of showcasing the rural beauty Britain had to offer. However, tied into these seemingly innocuous strategies of scene setting and plot is the binding together of a particular vision of the English countryside with an elite form of English leisure and pleasure-making. The picnic is a signifier of a romanticized England, connoting the English rural imaginary, and gesturing toward a time period when Britain was at the peak of its colonial power.

Historical studies show that the association between the countryside and Englishness dates essentially from the 19th century, a period marked by intensive urbanization and industrialization (Landry, 2013). It was in this particular socio-economic context that a discourse on rural heritage arose and that a new form of nationalism appeared based on rural scenery and the forms of social life associated with it. Just when the traditional landowning elite was losing power and the country's wealth lay in trade and industry, attachment to the land remained a symbolic foundation of Englishness (Ebbatson, 2005). The truth about England is anchored to the idea of a vanishing world, in a world that is supposed not to be corrupted by urban and industrial civilization. In a distinctive movement specific to the identity-finding process, Englishness tends to be defined by what it is not – Celtic, European, Catholic and then later, in contrast to the urban world, which is associated with the breakup

of community ties, and the invasion of ethnic and national others in particular after the Second World War and the moment of decolonisation. As an instrument for legitimizing membership of a specific nation, representations of the English countryside rely on the symbolic staging of a socially pacified and ethnically pure place, that is a place without class conflict and without non-white populations. Rural scenery is mobilized as a symbol of English national identity; like whiteness or Anglo-Saxon character, they are part of the construction of a legitimate order. Thus, the predominant rural image is one of a place that is white, pacified and unchanging. This unchanging image is, however, subject to social manipulation and is part of a process of reproduction and reinvention, and its supposed timelessness is called up once more in the Brexit basket, as a strategy of evoking a pure, uncontaminated England that is eternal, and essential in its national identity.

The English rural imaginary is mobilized in a number of contemporary popular media and cultural sites that intersect with the alimentary. One example of this is the former BBC and current Channel 4 reality television show *The Great British Bake Off* (Great British Bake Off, 2020). This popular show is currently on its ninth series. The contest format follows individual non-professional cooks and bakers as they compete to win the series and the crown of best baker. The show has proven widely accessible across a range of ages and socio-economic groups. Its migration from BBC to the self-consciously younger and hipper Channel 4 attests to its durability as a concept. The setting of the show is the pristine English countryside, the weather is always perfectly sunny, and the cooking itself takes place in a temporary, large, white marquee. This is a conscious departure from a number of other cooking reality television shows that take place exclusively in the sanitary confines of a professional kitchen. The title of the show also betrays its specific brand of nation-building – one that uses the codes of food and cooking in order to formulate a cohesive British food culture, and concurrently, a particular vision of Britain. The show has chosen an obvious signifier – the countryside – as the foundation upon which to build a coherent national alimentary discourse. The show is set in the idyllic grounds of a stately home, Welford Park in Newbury. The picnic format is also utilized, with the finale of the show incorporating a kind of outdoor high-tea set-up, where friends and family of the bakers are invited to come, watch and cheer on their favourites. The show's class politics is – consciously or not – encoded around certain notions of twee and/or posh England, seemingly as harmless as the elaborate cupcakes baked by contestants.

The rural imaginary is fundamentally structured – both its logic and its aesthetics – by lack, by an abundance of nothingness. The green rolling hills of the idyllic British countryside is a space that is imagined as unoccupied. It is not to be trespassed upon, nor is it to be developed, if it is to retain the essential Britishness contained within it. It also stands in opposition to the bloated imagery that constitutes the anxieties of Brexiteers, and directly validates the populist narrative that claims – incorrectly – that the UK is full (Farage, 2015) – there is no more space, for European immigrants, or for those refugee swarms that would


seek to enter through the free movement facilitated by EU membership. Perhaps it is less a question of lack of space that is being articulated here, but rather an instance that the British countryside remains empty, that the emptiness is somehow essential to some basic quality of Britishness. Here, again, postcolonial anxieties about immigration and invasion are playing out in the language and aesthetics of fullness and satiety.

Moreover, the Brexit basket reminds us that with both bodies and foods – there are good and bad types. The basket contains a sample of ‘good’ foods, foods associated with a romanticized vision of English nationalism, re-packaged as it is here within an idyllic image of the English countryside. These foods (or rather, the signified of the foods because obviously none of the items are ‘authentically’ British) are constructed as nourishing and welcome both inside the authentic British body and within Britain’s national borders. Similarly, bad foods (and the associated ‘bad bodies’) are contaminants that should be hastily ejected from the body politic, to return to a true and pure state of strong, masculine and lean health; a health that is also represented by the firm-but-fair politics associated with Churchill and a kind of food culture produced by the Second World War, fetishizing rationing and the ability to survive on little variety. The glorification of self-reliance – keeping calm and carrying on – in the face of adversity in order to defeat an ultimate evil, is also being summoned by the basket. Foreign foods are seen as luxuries and superfluous. This superfluity is then siphoned off onto not only the bodies of immigrants who contaminate the national boundaries with their exotic smells and unclean kitchens, but also from an impotent, overfed contemporary national identity that has grown fat and weak from an overabundance of food – the wrong type of food. By tapping into a romanticized version of the past, one that encapsulates the moment of decolonization and victory over the Nazis, a masculine, robust and lean image of Britain is co-opted into the contemporary moment. The breaking up of empire is being mourned in the basket, while it simultaneously deploys an eternal and romantic vision of Britain.

The alimentary aesthetics of Brexit are rooted in a nationalistic nostalgia that can be found in a number of different aspects of British culture and rooted deep within its contemporary popular consciousness. This aesthetic is expressed in a number of popular media forms, demonstrating the durability of alimentary metaphors in reference to the national context. These metaphors have their roots in a colonial and postcolonial discourse that is reanimated for contemporary socio-political purposes. This article has traced a discursive pathway through these histories, highlighting the material qualities of Brexit – that is, what does Brexit *taste* and *feel* like – exploring the ways in which affective structures of feeling are entangled with a material sense of space and satiety. These social feelings or patterns, provide a useful jumping-off point for an investigation into the origin of these alimentary metaphors and signs, but can also give us an indication of how Brexit might be productively reframed through this alimentary language. Although the alimentary may seem

like an innocuous aspect of the myriad Brexit narratives that exist, in actuality it articulates a number of pernicious narratives about Britain, race and its imperial past.

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